

TITLE: Reflections on Cross-Agency Assignments

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~~NOFORN~~*Rewarding rotations***Reflections on Cross-Agency Assignments**

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The assignment of intelligence officers from their parent agency to other parts of the Intelligence Community on a rotational basis is a career development option that has been discussed repeatedly over the years. Administrative problems, including the use of the polygraph examination, have limited the implementation of rotation schemes. To an even greater degree, senior management within the Community has not emphasized cross-agency experience as highly valuable to either agency performance or individual career development.

Budget cuts, a renewed emphasis on "corporate" behavior within the Community, and plans to "reinvent government" have created a new interest in cross-agency rotational assignments, making such duty a potentially more commonplace experience for the next generation of intelligence officers. In the following article, two intelligence officers from NSA and one from CIA reflect on their cross-agency tours.

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NSA

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In July 1990, after three years as SIGINT National Intelligence Officer (SINIO) for the Near East and South Asia, I became an Assistant National Intelligence Officer for the same region. An intended one-year excursion into the National Estimates process was about to extend into a five-year tour of duty.

My involvement with Estimates and the National Intelligence Council (NIC) had grown broader as well as longer. As originally defined, my SINIO role was for South Asia only, with another officer handling the Middle East. South Asia had the wonderful advantage of being an area of great interest to me but of relatively little interest to the US Government. I had hopes of something approaching a sabbatical.

When Gen. William Odom, then NSA's Director, decided that I should take on the entire NESA account, I tried to decline; the ratio of my interest (rather low) to that of the US Government (very high) in the Middle East seemed inconvenient.

"Convinced" by the General to rethink my decision, I resigned myself to the new job by noting that the timing was right. "At least," I assured him, "the Israelis and Palestinians are behaving themselves." This was in November 1987, two weeks before the outbreak of the *intifadah*.

Three years later, my timing had not improved. As I prepared to assume the Assistant NIO/NESA position, splitting my time between NSA and CIA, Iraq invaded Kuwait. At the beginning of a historic American involvement in the Middle East, the Assistant NIO for the region did not have a CIA badge, was not allowed into the SAFE system, could not figure out the phones, and occasionally got lost in the building.

Somehow, it all worked out. I never worked harder, challenged by the roughest (but best) intellectual peer competition I ever hope to encounter. I was putting in workdays that produced minimal consolation in allowing me to use the Cabin John Bridge at off-peak hours. And, over time, miracle of miracles, the number of outright gaffes tended to decline. (The first time I was to accompany the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence (DDCI) to the Hill for testimony I literally missed the bus. I was so new I did not know there was a bus. I thought everyone—Legislative Affairs personnel, analysts, and the DDCI—left together. So I simply appeared in the DDCI's outer office and waited for the crowd that

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never gathered. Predictably, the always gracious Dick Kerr took me in his car, and he did not even make me ride in the trunk.)

The job set new standards in forcing me to think faster and react more precisely. It required me to undertake a major cultural change—making the transition from SIGINT analysis to national intelligence assessments and estimates. It brought me into even closer contact with my colleagues in the Community.

As a SINIO, I had grumbled about the occasionally thin line between the NIC being at CIA but not, technically, being part of CIA. For a non-CIA outfit, for example, the NIC made a big deal about the writing style in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI). And when controversies arose on an estimate, only one agency's representatives were in position to walk down the hall and come back with a small army of reinforcements.

Despite these occasional concerns about the level of the coordinating field, I developed a great respect for my colleagues in the DI. This respect extended to other analysts in other agencies and survived even the occasional outbreaks of interagency rivalry. Perhaps because I came from beyond the finished intelligence community, I sometimes thought that I was especially sensitive to (and sometimes privy to) comments about relations within that community.

Sandra Mackey suggested in her book on the Saudis that being a woman actually helped her acquire "information when she was in Saudi Arabia. "The Saudis regard women as such mindless creatures that I was able to ask questions without raising suspicions," she later noted. As a representative of a "collection agency," I may have gotten a similar treatment.

For whatever reason, I had an excellent opportunity to observe the Intelligence Community. It was always great fun to watch the exchanges between DI analysts ("After all, why do you think they call us the Central Intelligence Agency?") and their counterparts from the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) ("We may be outnumbered, but we're never outthought!"). Would the

Defense Department come to meetings represented by DIA and the services? Or would the mere act of announcing a meeting reveal the presence of yet another staff or element, hitherto unknown but armed with a charter of some sort and an acronym that would defy the best efforts of NSA cryptanalysts? The experience even affected the way I looked at NSA and its work, especially the occasional tendency to report, without comment, as intelligence that which was no longer even news.

The NIC's location at CIA gave me a more intense look at CIA. The DI's analysts were the ones I saw day after day and were the ones with whom I had the most frequent opportunities to talk with informally, outside the often intense circumstances of estimate coordination.

I remain deeply impressed with the intelligence and curiosity of the DI's analytic force and the very real sense that the DI encouraged strongly held, well-reasoned dissent from even junior analysts. Many in the DI would be quick to point out the limits on this practice—even its absence in the presence of certain managers—but I would encourage them to believe that from the outsider's perspective it is the general practice, not its breaches, that gets noticed.

Ultimately, it was the outsider's perspective that I was allowed to contribute: the transitory ability to say, without appearing critical or cynical, "Why do you do it that way?" This, I suspect, is where cross-agency rotation has the capacity to help us all, by allowing a larger percentage of officers from across the Community to see things from an outsider's view.

Even more, rotation allows officers to return to their own agencies with the capacity to note, however carefully, "You know we do not have to do it that way. CIA (or DIA or INR, as the case may be) does it this way." (In my early months back at Fort Meade, I developed the unfortunate tendency to get my pronouns confused, contrasting the way "we" did things at Langley compared to the way "they" did it at NSA. After a few weeks at a reeducation camp, however, I was recertified as fit for duty.)

The Community needs more cross-agency assignments, in liaison positions and in places like the NIC and the Community Management Staff, but also integrated into line organizations. Each agency will, of course, determine that some positions require specialized experience that do not lend themselves to performance by an outsider. An NSA cryptanalyst, for example, is probably not going to be a good candidate to run covert action operations.

But strong functional analogs associated with the collection, processing, and dissemination of intelligence exist across the Community and should offer opportunities for fruitful exchanges of personnel. Every agency fights the tension between timeliness and completeness in reporting. Each has procedures for testing and evaluating the quality of its sources. All of us, one hopes, are constantly engaged in the search for better sources and methods. We need to work more closely in reviewing the results of these processes and the processes themselves.

We need to institutionalize the cross-agency experience by developing training programs that put greater focus on the interworkings of the Community. At the pinnacle of professional intelligence education and training, we should consider the creation of a National Senior Foreign Intelligence Course concentrated on the successes and failures of Community interaction. And we need, at the agency level, to reinforce the value of cross-agency experience by making it a significantly weighted ticket to be punched in career development.

At some point, we may even need to consider the creation of a National Foreign Intelligence Service, or at least a single senior intelligence service. This may seem a bit radical, but the precedent of the creation of the Foreign Service from the consular and diplomatic services is at least instructive—in its limits as well as its lessons.

An internal NSA study of a few years ago concluded that the agency had performed its mission “effectively but not efficiently,” a reflection of the generous appropriations provided to the agency during the Cold War. In much the same way, the Community has probably functioned at less than maximum efficiency, a reasonable shortfall in virtual wartime conditions in which efficiency *should* take a back seat to effectiveness.

Nonetheless, we should not expect such generosity in our immediate future. As we are called on to do more with less, one of the force multipliers of a more efficient Community should be a larger cadre of professional officers with intimate understanding of agencies other than their own.

Early in my tour at the NIC, I was complimented, along with the NIO for whom I worked (also an “outsider”), for our work during Desert Storm. “You performed like real troupers,” it was said. “But then we have always known that CIA people were real troupers.” At the moment, I took the latter comment about as well as the average southerner would appreciate being called a carpetbagger. Over time, however, I came to treasure the reference for what it was: possibly the highest praise I am ever going to get from a CIA professional rightly proud of his agency.

I would encourage every intelligence officer to take a cross-agency tour at some point in his or her career. It will add to one’s understanding of other agencies, and change perceptions of one’s own. Beyond that, the experience can encourage intelligence officers to see the Community as a truly national service.

My tour has left me with a sense of participation in that service that I could not have achieved otherwise. It is a participation I feel each time I walk through the lobby at CIA Headquarters, with its juxtaposition of the mission of American intelligence (“And ye shall know the truth . . .”) and the cost of that mission (the memorial book to officers killed in the line of duty). As the Community restructures for a different set of challenges, we need to ensure that cross-agency experience becomes central to the development of future generations of intelligence professionals.

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In August 1991, after almost a decade in South Asia and North Africa as a CIA case officer, I was looking forward to my next assignment (b)(3)(c). At the last minute, however, I had to give up the assignment because of a medical problem. For many

reasons, professional as well as personal, I was terribly disappointed. More than a modicum of disquiet was added to my disappointment when the Directorate of Operations (DO) responded by advising me that my new assignment would be on rotation to NSA.

Some of the negative side effects of the DO's high esprit de corps and camaraderie are incredible insularity and self-absorption. Except at the highest levels, DO employees tend to think of other governmental agencies in terms heavily tinged with pity. The mention of NSA immediately evoked in my mind some less than glowing images: huge, amorphous, military, inscrutable, and largely irrelevant to the real business of intelligence, which, everybody knows, is HUMINT. I asked for a few days to think about the job, and I contacted the incumbent. To my surprise, he appeared to be an upwardly mobile officer who was not serving out any particular penance for some misdeed. He described his time at Fort Meade in positive terms. I decided it was worth a try.

The job turned out to be one of the most rewarding and enlightening I will ever have. A few years before, the leadership of NSA and CIA had decided, as a confidence-building measure, to exchange officers who could facilitate cooperation at the corporate level. My predecessor had been the first to come from the CIA. He had done an outstanding job in starting to develop a real role for the position by expanding on the rather meaningless title of DCI Representative to NSA to take on an actual NSA job as one of the executive assistants to the Deputy Director. As I came into the job, the Deputy Director offered to make me his only assistant, a development which further enhanced my access and made it even easier for me to find issues in which I could play a constructive role.

Confidence-building between organizations has to begin at a personal level. The Deputy Director for Operations, on giving me the job, advised me that above all I was to exercise discretion and good judgment in representing one agency to the other. He accurately predicted that, if I did my job right, I would be privy at both NSA and CIA to highly confidential

deliberations which would be very interesting if leaked "across the river." He warned me, however, that this time the DO was not sending me out to spy; any tactical advantages I might be tempted to give one side through such a "spy in the enemy's camp" approach would not be worth the damage it could cause to the more important goal of improving cooperation.

Though my discretion was sorely tried on many occasions, by keeping confidences and trying to play a constructive role, I was given unlimited access to the innermost deliberations and candid discussions of NSA's leadership. NSA's trust in me allowed me to be of significantly greater value to both agencies.

I had a good vantage point from which to observe, and occasionally influence, the development of inter-agency policies. In its more dramatic moments, I felt, figuratively, like an observer on a mountaintop watching two trains hurtling blindly and headlong toward each other. Sometimes a gentle word of caution could sensitize one side to danger around the bend.

On other occasions, it was useful to conspire with my NSA counterparts at CIA to decide how best to defuse or limit a problem in the making. I had discovered, after a few months in the job, that the successful NSAers at CIA had also hit upon the obvious formula that discretion and nonparochialism usually inspire the host's confidence. Thus, those caught up in bilateral rotations, in addition to being hostage and counterhostage, are natural allies in trying to reduce friction between organizations.

Not all rotational assignments are alike, and some would have been a waste of my time. My assignment at NSA will, however, definitely be numbered among my most rewarding personally and professionally. In addition to correcting my preconceptions about NSA, my knowledge of the Intelligence Community and its place in the government expanded by an exponent which NSA's Cray supercomputers could never factor. My clearances multiplied twentyfold or more. I was able to observe the management of a large intelligence agency at close quarters. I learned of the

intricate interrelations—complementary, competing, and sometimes conflicting—among the elements of the Intelligence Community.

I was also fortunate in being exposed to the complex process whereby NSA and the Community develop, present, and justify budgetary packages to Congress. These, and many other experiences, forced me up and out of the trenches of clandestine HUMINT operations into the open, where I was able to look toward the horizon.

In a parochial sense, perhaps such broadening experiences may not be totally for the good of the parent organization: I will never again assume that I am working on the sole island of dedication and expertise in the government, and my organizational loyalties are no longer quite so narrow. Troubling as this may be for some, for those who have a rotational experience and go on to positions of leadership, such ecumenism may become more valuable as circumstances inexorably lead the elements of the Intelligence Community to cooperate more closely.

Learning the ways of others and making friends have been central to the DO's business overseas. It is slowly becoming more apparent to those at the working levels of the DO and other intelligence elements that the same tenets also apply in our need to work within our own government. Rotational assignments are essential to this process.

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In October 1990, for a one-year period, I was detailed from NSA to CIA to work as a special assistant to former DDCI Dick Kerr. I had applied for the position with no real idea of what it entailed, but I was eager to find out more about the workings of the CIA and the Intelligence Community. My year provided me with insights on those two entities, but it also provided information of far greater importance. Moreover, the personal challenges and rewards offered by the job were tremendous.

I was the second DDCI Special Assistant from NSA, a position established in 1990. The objective was to provide NSAers with an education on the Intelligence Community and the role of the DDCI, while providing the DDCI with someone knowledgeable about the SIGINT system. The basic assignment given me by the DDCI was to handle his Intelligence

Community work. The DCI and DDCI are the final decisionmakers on Community activities. At that time, the Intelligence Community Staff was responsible for working cross-community issues for DCI/DDCI decision. All that staff work flowed through me.

I also worked other issues as assigned, some involving the SIGINT system, and some with wider applications, like the strategy for presentation of the Community program to Congress, and the development of the DCI Nonproliferation Center. In addition, I attended virtually all of the DDCI's meetings, from his discussions with CIA analysts on intelligence issues to discussions with Community figures like the Director of the National Reconnaissance Office. The work was challenging and fascinating.

Because of its scope, the job provided me with insights into areas I could not have received from any other assignment.

First, I observed the interaction between the Intelligence Community and the policymaker. The job of the DCI and DDCI is largely to work with and understand the intelligence needs of the highest level policymakers, including the President. One of the DDCI's primary functions was to attend meetings of the National Security Council Deputies' Committee. During the Bush Administration, "the Deputies" functioned as a primary interagency forum on national security policy. For example, the Deputies met continuously to discuss and develop policy options during Desert Shield/Storm.

The chance to watch how intelligence contributes to policy decisions and how the highest level of policymaker drives the intelligence system during crises is invaluable to an intelligence officer. I gained some unique insights into the limitations of intelligence and the very real influence policymakers have on intelligence collection.

I also observed some senior executives at work. The pressures imposed on the DCI and DDCI, of a type undreamed of by most of us, and the ways in which they responded, provided important lessons on the management of large organizations. The spotlight is often on the DCI and DDCI, and public reviews of their actions were not always favorable. There is also a constant tension between a Community dealing in secrets and a legislature and press whose basic job is to serve the public.

The policymaker is not an easy master. He is a skeptic with firm ideas often rooted in his own past experience. The challenge of providing intelligence during Desert Shield/Storm and responding to criticism of the Intelligence Community in the aftermath was difficult duty for the DCI and DDCI. I observed that nothing substitutes for a basic understanding of your organization's responsibilities, a sincere desire to solve problems, grace under pressure, and a well-developed sense of humor.

I saw at close range the achievements, structure, strengths, and weaknesses of the agencies that constitute the Intelligence Community. Each week, I attended the National Foreign Intelligence Board with the DDCI, and, when it met, the National Foreign Intelligence Council (NFIC). The NFIC was charged with determining the final disposition of the National Foreign Intelligence Program—the Intelligence Community budget. Assisting the DDCI in preparing for those sessions, and observing the sessions themselves, was a lesson in organizational decisionmaking in the resource arena. And performing the daily task of coordinating Community documents before DDCI signature was enlightening. I was surprised at the coordination and structure in evidence in the Community.

Finally, I did observe CIA at close range, again through seeing documents, listening to briefings, and working with CIA personnel. I developed great respect for the ability of CIA personnel to function under great pressure and intense scrutiny. Like every

other agency in the Community, however, CIA is undergoing a great deal of change, particularly in the military support arena. Given the shift in the focus of military support from the old Cold War model to smaller operations in diverse corners of the world, I believe a greater CIA role in military support is desirable.

I would strongly encourage intelligence officers from any agency in the Community to consider a tour of duty in another agency. Whether you intend to follow the technical track or become a manager, you gain from the experience of working in an institution with different missions, goals, and methods.

There are also valuable insights to be gained in viewing one's own agency from the outside. One leaves an outside assignment with a far greater appreciation of where the parent organization fits and what ought to be done to improve the services it provides.

I believe an outside tour will provide anyone with a unique sense of his or her own capabilities and limits. It increases self-confidence immeasurably. In an era of personnel reductions throughout the US Government, I hope that more cross-agency tours will be encouraged. The benefits far outweigh the losses.

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